

Seago, K. (1999). New Wine in Old Bottles?: Angela Carter's Bloody Chamber of Revisioned Fairy Tales. *Métaphore*, 26, 7 - 98.



**CITY UNIVERSITY  
LONDON**

[City Research Online](http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/1757/)

**Original citation:** Seago, K. (1999). New Wine in Old Bottles?: Angela Carter's Bloody Chamber of Revisioned Fairy Tales. *Métaphore*, 26, 7 - 98.

**Permanent City Research Online URL:** <http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/1757/>

### **Copyright & reuse**

City University London has developed City Research Online so that its users may access the research outputs of City University London's staff. Copyright © and Moral Rights for this paper are retained by the individual author(s) and/ or other copyright holders. All material in City Research Online is checked for eligibility for copyright before being made available in the live archive. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to from other web pages.

### **Versions of research**

The version in City Research Online may differ from the final published version. Users are advised to check the Permanent City Research Online URL above for the status of the paper.

### **Enquiries**

If you have any enquiries about any aspect of City Research Online, or if you wish to make contact with the author(s) of this paper, please email the team at [publications@city.ac.uk](mailto:publications@city.ac.uk).

## **'New Wine in Old Bottles'?: Angela Carter's Bloody Chamber of Revisioned Fairy Tales**

---

*... most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode.*<sup>1</sup>

Made in 1983, four years after the publication of her collection of imaginatively rewritten fairy stories *The Bloody Chamber*, Angela Carter's comment is a succinct description of what she intended her revision of classical fairy tales to be: using the established format of the fairy story and filling it with newly produced content in such a way that the rigid constraints of the past are transgressed and open up ways for a new appreciation of a genre which has been severely criticised for its didactic function in socialising generations of girls (and boys) into constricting and stereotypical gender roles.<sup>2</sup> But I also chose this particular quotation because Angela Carter made it in her essay 'Notes from the Front Line' in which she summarised her understanding of herself as an author and the importance that feminism had to her writing. In this context, it also encapsulates in very few words Carter's approach to literature and culture, her role as a writer and her political agenda, all of which play an important role in understanding her approach to fairy tales and how she sees their function in society and culture.

Criticised for her ornate style which has been said to dazzle and seduce the reader with its coruscating surfaces but to be devoid of substance,<sup>3</sup> Carter's writing nevertheless has a clear emancipatory impetus, expressed in her famous comment that she is 'in the de-mythologising business.'<sup>4</sup> Myths are, for Carter, the point at which the literary and the political converge because she sees them as 'products of the human mind' which are 'extraordinary lies designed to

---

<sup>1</sup> Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', in *On Gender and Writing*, edited by Michelene Wandor (London, Boston: Pandora Press, 1983), pp. 69-77 (69)

<sup>2</sup> Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (London: Gollancz, 1979). All page references refer to the Penguin edition, 1981.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Clark, 'Angela Carter's Desire Machine', *Women's Studies*, 14, 1987, pp. 147-61 (159)

<sup>4</sup> Carter, 'Notes', p. 74

make people unfree.<sup>5</sup> Understanding myth both in the conventional sense of narratives about supernatural events or persons and in the Barthesian sense as images, ideas and beliefs which have been 'taken on trust ... without trying to work out what' they really mean, Carter's work is an act of demythologising cultural analysis. Primarily concerned with the latter understanding of myth, she engages with the naturalised social fictions which regulate people's lives, and central among them, is the myth of femininity (and masculinity):

'Since it was, ..., primarily through my sexual and emotional life that I was radicalised - that I first became truly aware of the difference between how I was and how I was supposed to, or expected to be - I found myself, as I grew older, increasingly writing about sexuality and its manifestations in human practice.'<sup>6</sup>

It is in this context that she sees the past, especially the literary past, as a 'vast repository of outmoded lies, where you can check out what lies used to be à la mode and find the old lies on which new lies have been based.'<sup>7</sup> Naturalised myths are historically encoded into all areas of social life and cultural meaning and mediated by literary forms. Language, consequently, is for Carter the 'life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination,' but it can also function as the tool of 'liberation' and writers can change the world, re-write cultural and social scripts by 'transforming actual fictional forms to both reflect and to precipitate changes in the way people feel about themselves.'<sup>8</sup> Carter sees literature as an intertextual system which uses and re-uses existing materials to give them new and socially relevant meanings. Accordingly, for her writing she raids 'the lumber room of the Western European imagination' where she finds 'most of her raw materials,'<sup>9</sup> both for her debunking of received 'truths' and as the building blocks out of which she fashions her extraordinarily imaginative stories. Storytelling is crucial to Carter; as she said in 1978: 'to explore ideas ... for me ... is the same thing as telling stories since,

---

<sup>5</sup> Carter, 'Notes', p. 71

<sup>6</sup> Carter, 'Notes', p. 72

<sup>7</sup> Carter, 'Notes', p. 74

<sup>8</sup> Carter, 'Notes', pp. 76-7

<sup>9</sup> Carter, 'Notes', p. 74

for me, a narrative is an argument stated in fictional terms.<sup>10</sup> But it is also crucial in a much wider sense, relating to the uses she made of fairy tales, and later, folk tales, and increasingly to her own identity as an author.<sup>11</sup> Initially interested in fairy stories as examples of the 'fraudulent magic' and 'bankrupt enchantments' of romance which perpetuate the myths of sexuality and of patriarchy, her later interest turned to traditional stories as 'unofficial culture,' mediated anonymously and primarily through women tellers.<sup>12</sup> These 'stories without known originators that can be remade again and again by every person who tells them,' are very close to Carter's own political and aesthetic project of re-writing and reference where the text is created in the interaction between the mediator - be it oral storyteller or published author -, the listener/reader, and the cultural, social and textual context. Such a down-grading of the authority of both text and author accords with Carter's intertextual approach and is, like the tradition of the peasant tale, in direct opposition to contemporary Western society's veneration of 'the work of art as a unique one-off, and the artist as an original, a godlike and inspired creator of unique one-offs.'<sup>13</sup> Both Lorna Sage and Marina Warner have pointed out that Carter 'took on the voice of the yarn spinning grandmother'<sup>14</sup> as dis-guise and strategy for 'the construction of self in image and language.'<sup>15</sup>

Carter said of herself that she 'relaxed into folklore with a book of stories about fairy stories' because they were 'much easier to infiltrate with different kinds of consciousness' than myths and because it was 'easier to deal with the shifting structures of reality and sexuality by

---

<sup>10</sup> Angela Carter, 'Preface,' in *Come Unto these Yellow Sands* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1978), pp. 7-13 (7)

<sup>11</sup> Carter used fairy tales in three ways: a) motifs and narrative patterns as intertextual placings in her novels, b) in her re-writing of classical tales, and c) in collecting and editing two anthologies of folk tales.

<sup>12</sup> Angela Carter, 'Introduction', *The Virago Book of Fairy Stories*, ed. by Angela Carter (London: Virago, 1991), pp. ix-xvii (ivx)

<sup>13</sup> Carter, 'Introduction', *Virago Book*, p. x

<sup>14</sup> Lorna Sage, 'Introduction,' in *Flesh and the Mirror, Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. by Lorna Sage (London: Virago, 1994), pp. 1-23 (2)

<sup>15</sup> Marina Warner, 'Angela Carter: Bottle Blonde, Double Drag', in *Flesh and the Mirror, Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. by Lorna Sage (London: Virago, 1994), pp. 243-56 (248)

using sets of shifting structures derived from orally transmitted traditional tales.'<sup>16</sup> Her collection of rewritten classical fairy stories, *The Bloody Chamber* was published in the same year that her interrogation of the French philosopher Sade appeared as *The Sadeian Woman*.<sup>17</sup> She deals in both books with the processes of how the social fictions of femininity and masculinity are constructed and how the artificial constrictions of a sexual economy of opposition are presented as immutable fact. It is one of her aims to reveal these constructs of opposition as naturalised myths, and she sets about doing so in theoretical, though highly polemic terms, in *The Sadeian Woman* and in fictional form in *The Bloody Chamber*, thus making the latter truly an 'argument in narrative'.

Setting out to uncover the 'violently sexual,' latent subtext of classical fairy tales,<sup>18</sup> Carter uses the Sadeian stance of the pornographer as satirist and social critic in her re-written versions: if sexual relations mirror social relations, then the more explicitly sexual relations are described, the more clearly their social implications are uncovered. Carter takes Sade's analysis of sexuality as violent exploitation, which is defined by a relationship of dominance and subjection and uses this as a starting point for her description of the status quo of the relations between men and women. However, opposed to this form of sexual division where pleasure is allied to power, Carter crucially proposes the possibility of equality and reciprocity, a fact often ignored by her critics.

The stories in *The Bloody Chamber* are revisions of some of the most favourite classic fairy tales drawing on Mme Prince de Beaumont for her 'Beauty and the Beast,' Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm for 'Bluebeard,' 'Puss in Boots,' 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Little Red Riding Hood,' and an alternative version of 'Snow White', recorded by the Brothers Grimm in their scholarly appendix to the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812). They fall into two groups: those in the first are primarily an unrelieved description of the status quo, exposing the

---

<sup>16</sup> Carter, 'Notes', p. 71

<sup>17</sup> Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman, An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago, 1979)

<sup>18</sup> Angela Carter in interview with Kerry Goldsworth, quoted in Robin Ann Sheets, 'Pornography, Fairy Tales, and Feminism,' *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 1990-91, 1:4, pp. 633-57 (642)

oppressive nature of a sexuality of domination and subjection. In these, Carter explores the objectification of desire around the paradigm of the victimiser and the victim. She highlights the contractual basis of patriarchal sexuality by using the central interpretative metaphor of meat and through this links the sociosexual aggressor to the predatory, carnivorous eater and the victim to its prey, the herbivorous eaten. Of the ten stories in *The Bloody Chamber*, seven belong in this category, while the remaining three are the utopian stories in which Carter develops a vision of a sexuality of mutuality, exchange and reciprocity. This is signified by the exchanges of flesh on flesh, rejecting the notion of victimiser and victim and transcending the restrictive hierarchies of phallogentric sexuality.

Traditional tale	Status quo	Utopian
Bluebeard	The Bloody Chamber	
Beauty and the Beast	The Courtship of Mr Lyon	The Tiger's Bride
Animal husband	The Erl-King	Wolf-Alice
Little Red-Riding Hood	The Werewolf	The Company of Wolves
Sleeping Beauty	The Lady of the House of Love	
Snow White	The Snow Child	
Puss in Boots	Puss-in-Boots	

Despite this apparently simple dialectic of 'good' and 'bad,' all of the stories present a highly complex exploration of sexuality and the stories which describe the status quo of a sexuality of domination and subjection do so in terms of a sharp critique, exposing the violent, unjust and exploitative nature of these relations as essentially pornographic even if the relationship of the protagonists is coded as successful and 'happy' within the narrative expectations set up by the fairy tale framework. Furthermore, all the stories in Carter's collection comment on each other - the two versions of 'Beauty and the Beast,' for example, explore different facets of the classic story - but there are also intratextual references from other stories in the collection, adding further layers of interpretation. So, for example, the 'victim'-bride in 'The Bloody Chamber' is given a ruby-choker by her murderous husband as a wedding-present which symbolically figures her objectification as a sexual possession and prefigures her death as the

inevitable outcome to the sado-masochistic relationship of this oppressive marriage. This choker reappears in 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' as a dog-collar on 'Beauty's precious pet-spaniel setting up a series of allusions and echoes in which the apparently gentle courtship of Beauty and the Beast is linked to the brutally exploitative sexual-economic contract in 'The Bloody Chamber.' Since the classic story of 'Beauty and the Beast' derives its narrative momentum from precisely such a patriarchal contract between the Beast and Beauty's father, the disguised barter is shown up through the intratextual link and Beauty's selfless decision to sacrifice herself willingly for her father's well-being appears not as self-determined choice but as a predetermined course in a society where women figure as objects of exchange. 'The Tiger's Bride,' on the other hand, Carter's second version of 'Beauty and the Beast,' begins with the father openly bartering his daughter at a game of cards. The explicit nature of the trade-off serves to enlighten the female protagonist about the confines of her 'nature' as a woman in patriarchal society and her encounter with the beast teaches her to let go of humanity's arrogant self-conception as the pinnacle of all creation and embrace a partnership which transcends a subjectivity which depends on an excluded Other, be this woman, animal or nature. However, the fact that this sexuality of mutuality is a utopian vision is conveyed by the apparent impossibility of conceiving it in human terms; Beauty in 'The Tiger's Bride,' does so in animal form, transforming into a big cat herself, the wolf-girl in 'Wolf-Alice' occupies the boundary between human and animal and in one of the 'Red Riding Hood' adaptations, 'The Company of Wolves,' the 'strong-minded child' retains her human shape but does so in the terms prefigured by the title of the story, joining the wolves in the woods.<sup>19</sup> Problematically, the attempt to transcend patriarchy's sexuality of binaries occurs in the form of or within the habitat of the carnivore, a metaphor Carter employs also for the sexual predator and the utopian stories thus appear to carry with them the seed of aggression.

While *The Bloody Chamber* was conceived as demystifying social critique, it has had a mixed and volatile reception. Like her other work, it runs the danger of complicity with the structures of domination against which Carter's writing is ostensibly directed and this is reflected

---

<sup>19</sup> *Bloody Chamber*, p. 113

in the very negative responses from some feminist scholars, who criticised Carter for reproducing a male voice of desire which in their view ultimately re-inserted her revisioned tales into male pornography.<sup>20</sup> Her exploration of violence and perversity as part of female sexuality has been attacked as a distorted version of stereotypical representations of female sexuality. Representations of (sexually) assertive women as victimisers such as the predatory 'lovely lady vampire'<sup>21</sup> in 'The Lady of the House of Love' who consumes her victims 'with a nauseated voluptuousness'<sup>22</sup> were rejected for remaining within the paradigm of violent duality and Carter was condemned for imagining emancipation in terms of an escape from victimisation by making women victimisers themselves. But other critics have also found the inclusion of violence as part of female sexuality as liberating, praising Carter for her complex view of female desire which explodes the stereotype of women as passive and demure cyphers.<sup>23</sup> Even more conflicted, however, was Carter's exploration of the erotics of objectification, her depiction of female victims complicit in their violation and experiencing desire for being made the object of desire; examples for this are the child-bride in 'The Bloody Chamber' and the unnamed protagonist in 'The Erl-King.'<sup>24</sup> However, as Jordan points out in her passionate defence of 'the dangers of Angela Carter,'

repeating and departing from the inheritance described struck me as a good account of the processes of Carter's writing, and the strongest answer to the charge that she merely reinscribes patriarchy. Where else can you start from, if not from where you actually are?<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Patricia Duncker, 'Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's *Bloody Chambers*', in: *Literature and History: A New Journal for the Humanities*, 1985, 10:1, Spring 1985: 3-14, Avis Lewallen, 'Wayward Girls but Wicked Women? Female Sexuality in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*,' in *Perspectives on Pornography*, ed. by Gary Day and Clive Bloom (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 144-158, Robert Clark

<sup>21</sup> Carter, 'Preface', *Yellow Sands*, p. 9

<sup>22</sup> *Bloody Chamber*, p. 96

<sup>23</sup> Merja Makinen, 'Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality', *Feminist Review*, No 42, Autumn 1992, pp2-15 (9)

<sup>24</sup> Lewallen, pp. 151-2 and Clark, pp. 148-9

<sup>25</sup> Elaine Jordan, 'The Dangers of Angela Carter,' in *New Feminist Discourses*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 119-31 (125)



Crucially, the women in both tales grow to understand the danger of their 'queasy craving' and reject a relationship which would have obliterated them.<sup>26</sup> And this is the central point to *The Bloody Chamber*: however phallocentric sexuality is described (constructions of which are shown to determine the desires and actions of some of the women in some of the versions), nevertheless, in every single tale the protagonist gains an understanding of how violently restrictive their 'nature' as women is constructed and rejects this. Thus, while some critics have been disturbed and repelled by the seductive descriptions of masochism,<sup>27</sup> or have asked themselves whether *The Bloody Chamber* could be understood by a reader who did not already bring a feminist knowledge to the text,<sup>28</sup> the fact remains that the narrative development in all the stories subverts the terms within which both femininity and masculinity is constructed.

It is to narrative structure and considerations of genre that I wish to turn in this second half and consider the critique of *The Bloody Chamber* as re-inscribing patriarchal values by virtue of the fact that fairy tales are an ideologically inscribed genre where 'the ideological power of the form [is] infinitely greater than the power of the individual to overcome it.'<sup>29</sup> Feminist scholars showed how fairy tales perpetuate the myths of sexuality and of patriarchy, actively participating in constructing the boundaries of masculinity and femininity by reinforcing traditional ideas about sex roles.<sup>30</sup> These are encapsulated in the tales' gender specific reward system where activity is coded as positive, leading to success when performed by the male protagonist, but as negative when linked to a female character. Similarly, the characters' attributes fall into clearly defined, gender-dependent categories and these are unequivocally

---

<sup>26</sup> *Bloody Chamber*, p. 22

<sup>27</sup> Lewallen, p. 151

<sup>28</sup> Clark, p. 159 and Makinen, pp. 6 & 14

<sup>29</sup> Clark makes this judgement while discussing Carter's, in his view, unsuccessful, subversion of pornography which is, however, used to substantiate his argument that *The Bloody Chamber* promotes masculinist assumptions. pp. 152-3

<sup>30</sup> Marcia K. Liebermann, '"Some Day My Prince Will Come": Female Acculturation Through the Fairy Tale,' *College English*, 34, 1972, pp. 383-95, Karen E. Rowe, 'Feminism and Fairy Tales', *Women's Studies*, 6, 1979, pp. 237-57, Kay F. Stone, 'Things Walt Disney Never Told Us,' in *Women and Folklore*, ed. by Claire R. Farrer (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1975), pp. 42-50

linked to moral properties: men are defined through their deeds while women's primary identity derives from their appearance. Thus, ugliness inevitably signals moral laxity and sometimes even evil, while female beauty connotes goodness, but only if it is linked to two further crucial elements: youth and passivity. Physical attractiveness in old(er) women is an indication of evil, and is also linked to their activity, which is always presented as negative and usually aimed at a younger 'rival.' Female success is achieved in the fairy tale by being young, beautiful, passive and by being a victim who patiently waits to be rescued from the persecution of an (almost always) older woman. Relationships between women are motivated by competition and jealousy, enacted along an axis of age and physical attraction and seen only in relation to men. Punishment in the fairy tale is meted out to women who are ugly, (physically and mentally) active or old and who attempt to exert power over their environment or determine their sexuality. Retribution is also gender-coded in that it is excessively harsh for even the smallest female misdemeanors, while frequently horrific behaviour in men is often not even signalled as a transgression. Compare the father's 'normal' action in the Grimm tale, 'The Girl Without Hands,' when he chops off his daughter's hands because the devil, to whom she was bartered by her father, is unable to claim her on account of her purity, symbolised by her cleanliness, with Little Red Riding Hood's deviation from the path, punished by death in the Perrault version. Such punitive regulatory fictions are nevertheless mediated in a genre which is linked to pleasure, and thus ensures that women internalise the mindset and language of patriarchy.

It has been argued that a feminist re-visioning of popular tales is impossible because this ideological inscription is so dominant that it will cut across and render invisible any attempts to re-appropriate these stories, or even any motifs associated with them, into a discourse outside oppression. Patricia Duncker's belief that the fairy tale's patriarchal coding cannot be unscripted however disregards the mechanisms of reverse discourse. As Kate Soper points out,

'the force of the idea that that "resistance" is always re-contained within dominant culture relies on an undialectical conception of society itself. For it invites us to overlook the

transformative and progressive potential for "dominant culture" of the margins it comes to "contain".<sup>31</sup>

Thus the dominant voice of the patriarchal classic fairy tale can, and is, increasingly inflected by the reformulations undertaken on the margins of the body of canonical fairy tales by feminist revisions. And in fact, the genre of the folk tale is historically defined by precisely a process of change in which versions adapt to the particular requirements of a particular socio-cultural context at each moment of mediation. Fairy tales have not only moved between countries and cultures for centuries but have also successfully adapted to different modes of transmission in oral, print and visual form. As Jack Zipes has argued, oral tales, rather than always upholding the status quo of power relations, were often a subversive attempt to comment on and re-align class based inequalities before they were appropriated by the middle-classes<sup>32</sup> and turned into 'educational propaganda for children.'<sup>33</sup> While collectors and editors such as Charles Perrault at the end of the seventeenth century in France, and the Brothers Grimm at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Germany preserved many of the oral tales then current from extinction, the inclusion of these tales into what came to be formative collections also served to freeze them into a particular format. Since both Perrault and the Grimms aimed their tales not at an adult audience but at children, the function of fairy tales also changed from being entertainment for grown-ups to a didactic genre aimed at educating children into their sex roles. Thus, the fairy tale's socialising function of upholding the status quo of gender relations is a recent one. Fairy tales are themselves products of a naturalising, mythicising process which has evolved over the last three centuries. A process of selection and editing has created a 'fairy tale canon' which has resulted in a rather restricted understanding of what is popularly understood by 'a fairy tale.' As with all canon-formation, deselection played an immense role so that those tales which did not conform to dominant values were not included in printed editions. Material which was excluded was often

---

<sup>31</sup> Kate Soper, 'Productive Contradictions,' in *Up Against Foucault, Explorations of Some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism* ed. by Caroline Ramazanoglu (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 29-50 (34)

<sup>32</sup> Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion, The Classic Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization* (London: Heinemann, 1983)

<sup>33</sup> Duncker, pp. 4-5

of a bawdy nature, irreverent with respect to the depiction of figures of authority and in relation to sacred subject matter, or were crudely constructed, and often fragmentary, narratives. Most importantly when considering the feminist critique of the fairy tale of enshrining and constructing restrictive sex roles, those tales which did not conform to patriarchal gender politics, also tended to be excluded. Thus there are many oral tales which depict active and resourceful heroines who are immensely capable of saving themselves rather than depending on male help but these stories were either not included in printed collections or were rewritten in such a way that they conformed to the paradigm of male saviour and female victim. Thus, many of the features which feminist scholars (rightly) criticised in (popular) fairy tales are not inherent elements of the genre as such but are constitutive only of the canonical tales which represent just a small, and strictly edited proportion of traditional, or oral tales. What is now perceived as a rigid and monolithic narrative form apparently speaking only with the single voice of authority and the law is, in fact, the end-product of the creation of a particular form of fairy tale which - since it was constructed - can also be de-constructed.

Angela Carter was very aware of the formative history of the fairy tale and in her re-writing she is not only 'snatching out of the jaws of misogyny itself, "useful stories" for women,'<sup>34</sup> but also engages with the 'archaeology' of her stories. In the last part of this article, I will look at Carter's narrative strategies, and how she employs these in order to re-vision fairy tales not only in terms of an exchange of pronouns (often seen as the 'only' form of revisioning) but in terms of a highly sophisticated and complex program which undermines the authority of the canonical tale. She does this by returning to and using the narrative patterns of alternative and often orally mediated variants of the classical tales. While this to some extent revalidates the traditional tale, Carter at the same time inverts elements of the traditional tale, reinterpreting not only individual motifs but also, and even more importantly, transgressing genre conventions. These disruptions give the tales in her collection a narrative fluidity and openness which

---

<sup>34</sup> Marina Warner, 'Introduction,' *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, ed. by Angela Carter (London: Virago, 1992), pp. ix-xvii (x)

explodes 'the straitjacket of their original structures' rather than staying within in them as Duncker has claimed.<sup>35</sup>

Carter's demythologising addresses both the didactic impact of fairy tales as 'text books' of patriarchy, teaching 'phallic worth and female masochism'<sup>36</sup> and the appropriation of fairy tales as a monologic and hegemonic genre. Here her consciously deployed intertextual approach is crucial in subverting the oppressive closure of phallogentric tales. Carter queries the single voice of the fairy tale's social authority by setting within her texts innumerable intertexts which all speak with each other, against each other and through each other. In the place of the universal, she inserts uncertainty and ambiguity, thus requiring the reader to be actively involved in the creation of meaning. As Cranny-Francis has pointed out, classical fairy tales encode a conservative ideological discourse and by naturalising the socialising discourse they carry, fairy tales project the reader as passive. Feminist revisionings of tales, on the other hand, posit their readers as active, because they read the revised against its discursive referent, the traditional story, so that the reader enters into a dialogue with both the old and the new version.<sup>37</sup> According to Makinen, this initiates an ironic oscillation which plays on and constantly questions the older version's meaning with the re-interpreted contrastive meanings of the new version.<sup>38</sup>

In 'The Snow Child,' based on an alternative version of 'Snow White' discarded by the Brothers Grimm, the reversal and inversion of motifs is particularly prominent. Carter focuses in her version on the beautiful queen's jealousy of her step-daughter's beauty and shows this to be justified reaction in a society where women are entirely dependent on men for their existence. In Carter's version it is the male from whom the wish for a child emanates rather than from the queen as it does in the traditional story. The wished-for girl is truly an object of desire for the Count whose fancy conjures her up to satisfy exactly his image of her:

---

<sup>35</sup> Duncker, p. 6

<sup>36</sup> Duncker, pp. 3 & 8

<sup>37</sup> Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p. 89

<sup>38</sup> Makinen, p. 5

'As soon as he completed her description, there she stood, beside the road, white skin, red mouth, black hair and stark naked; she was the child of his desire and the countess hated her.'<sup>39</sup>

What Bettelheim had condemned as the queen's narcissistic jealousy of her step-daughter's beauty in the traditional tale<sup>40</sup> is given a reason in the 'Snow Child' where the girl is shown to be her rival, a younger replacement. The victimisation now has as its aim the older woman who loses all her status symbols and protection, as they are transferred to the girl, while the traditional persecution sequence, the witch's three attempts on the innocent young girl's life, are shown by Carter to be a reaction by the older woman to protect her own existence and status which only exist in relation to and on the sufferance of the Count. While it is the prince's love in the traditional which is instrumental in reviving the apparently dead Snow White, Carter picks up on the possessiveness which characterises the prince's coveting of Snow White as an object of beauty and turns this in her version into the final act of destruction by the Count: after he has copulated with the dead body of the girl, she dissolves leaving behind only a trace of blood and the rose which had stung her to death. The necrophilic desire of the Count and the symbol of the fanged rose connect this story to 'The Lady of the House of Love,' Carter's version of 'The Sleeping Beauty.'

Her interpretation retains all the core motifs of the popular version such as the curse on the beautiful child at birth, the fate of death suspended to a century of sleep, the fulfilment of the curse when the princess pricks her finger on a spindle, the prince as saviour with his life-restoring kiss. But every single one of these motifs is inverted or interpreted through the conventions of the gothic vampire myth which allows Carter to foreground a series of submerged meanings in the traditional tale revolving around rape, necrophilic desire, fears of female sexuality and jealousy. While these elements are not apparent in any of the popular versions of 'Sleeping Beauty' deriving from either Perrault or Grimm, they are openly present in precursors of the tale such as the fourteenth century anonymous novel *Perceforest*, the late fourteenth

---

<sup>39</sup> *Bloody Chamber*, pp. 91-2

<sup>40</sup> Bettelheim, pp. 202-3

century Catalan poem 'Frayre de joy e Sor de plaser', or Basile's 'Sole, Lune e Talia' where the male protagonist rapes the sleeping girl who is later persecuted by his betrayed and jealous wife. By making the heroine a vampire, Carter brilliantly focuses and expresses a cluster of the old tale's motifs in one single image. The traditional Sleeping Beauty is apparently dead but only sleeping, the vampire a revenant, returned from the dead but unable to join the living during the day. Both are condemned to an existence of suspended animation and wait for their saviour to come to their rescue from outside. Furthermore, by using the gothic vampire as an intertext, the rape of the sleeping girl in the story's precursors is alluded to by the reader's knowledge of the fate of female vampires like Lucy Westenra in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* who can only be laid to rest when penetrated by a stake through the heart. The underlying implications of necrophilia in the older versions of 'Sleeping Beauty' are further reinforced and exposed as the vicarious fulfilment of male phantasies in the description of the Countess' bedroom which resembles a Paris brothel:

'Ten louis would buy just such a lugubrious bedroom, with a naked girl upon a coffin; offstage, the brothel pianist played the *Dies Irae* on a harmonium and, amidst all the perfumes of the embalming parlour, the customer took his necrophiliac pleasure of a pretended corpse.'<sup>41</sup>

Like the Sleeping Beauty, the unnaturally beautiful Countess is cursed at birth, but she is defined through her ancestors, 'each one of whom projects a baleful posthumous existence through her'<sup>42</sup> to be a vampire, a fate she desperately rejects but cannot escape through her own attempts. Locating the curse within the family, Carter thus transposes its source to a diffuse sense of hereditary tradition, rejecting the popular tale, and in particular Disney's interpretation, which represent the spiteful, evil and old fairy as the origin of the curse. In doing this she undoes one of the reinterpretations of an older motif from medieval tales where the fairies are representations of the norms or fates whose good wishes at birth are linked to their role of supervising the crucial stages of life: birth, maturity and death. Since Carter also makes the curse a condition of tradition, family history and aristocratic breeding, where the Countess' birth into the line of

---

<sup>41</sup> *Bloody Chamber*, p. 105

<sup>42</sup> *Bloody Chamber*, p. 93



vampires is her destiny and requires her to lead a confined existence, she sets up a parallel with this hereditary condition and comments on the condition of women as the inheritors of patriarchy where 'biology is destiny' and condemns them to a shadow existence of an equally constricted life. Sleeping Beauty and Carter's Countess are the opposite sides of an image of woman neither dead nor fully alive, condemned to a life of passivity by the law of the father.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, the fulfilment of the curse, brought about by Sleeping Beauty pricking her finger on a spindle, and the disenchantment of the original tale is transposed and inverted: the motif of the prince's life-giving kiss is first transformed into the death-dealing bite of the vampire delivered by the voraciously predatory Countess, it then becomes an 'innocent nursery remedy'<sup>44</sup> when the young soldier sucks her thumb<sup>45</sup> after the Countess has injured her hand on a piece of glass. Shedding her blood immediately leads to her disenchantment which however leads to her destruction rather than rescue. Thus expectations are doubly upset; on the level of narrative when it is the hero instead of the vampire who sucks the other's blood and in the context of the fairy tale when the saviour's kiss achieves the opposite of the expected happy end. In fact, when Carter's soldier breaks the spell of the vampire he brings about an inverted version of the traditional spell of death originally cast by the evil fairy. Thus Carter not only rehabilitates the old woman but re-assigns her function to the traditional saviour, showing the rescue by the prince to be the real danger. However, within the terms of this tale describing the status quo of relations between men and women, the Countess' death is nevertheless presented as a release, both from

---

<sup>43</sup> In her radio play 'Vampirella,' which predates the short story, Carter makes the curse of the law of the father even more explicit by having him present as a character, whose voice comments on (and to some extent enforces) the unfolding of the myth through his daughter's reluctant life. *Yellow Sands*, pp. 84-118

<sup>44</sup> *Bloody Chamber*, p. 106

<sup>45</sup> This is a reference to one of the precursors of 'The Sleeping Beauty' in which the princess bears two children after having been 'seduced' by a King who comes upon her while lost hunting in the woods. She only wakes up when her son sucks her thumb and thus dislodges the thorn which had brought about her magic sleep. Bettelheim, in his famous Freudian interpretation of fairy tales interprets the fact that the princess only wakes up at this point that full female maturity only occurs with motherhood. Carter's disagreement with this can be seen in her conclusion to her re-written version; it brings about the death of the protagonist. Bruno Bettelheim *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976), p. 235



her 'imitation of a life,'<sup>46</sup> and the future planned by the soldier whose plans are to take her to be 'cured' and normalised within the modern world. Both characters are locked into a script of restricting expectations; the girl's desire for change is cast in the delusory forms of romance, wearing her mother's wedding dress, she longs for a saviour to introduce her into the daylight and closure of marriage rather than conceiving of the possibility of change herself. His attitude to her is stereotypically rational and condescending, reading the mysterious, the nocturnal and the mythic as delusions of a childlike, and perhaps slightly retarded, mind.

While Carter was using material from older or alternative variants in the two stories discussed above, undoing the process of the ideological appropriation of oral material into phallogentric stories of warning is a more explicit theme in her re-workings of 'Little Red Riding Hood.' Her apparently simple reversal of the passive victim in Perrault and Grimm into an active heroine, a self-reliant little girl who is quite capable of dealing with the dangers of the wolf herself in 'The Werewolf' is also a re-appropriation of the history of this tale. First of all, Carter's child can defend herself against the wolf, saving herself without help from anybody else, and in this she reverses the Grimm version, where the girl's rescue depends on the woodcutter. However, by removing the woodcutter, Carter is, to some extent, retracing the revision which the story had undergone in its move from Perrault's seventeenth century French story to the Grimms' nineteenth century German version. Secondly, by allowing her child to survive, Carter is also reversing the French tradition in which the adolescent heroine dies as a result of transgressing the implicit codes of sexual behaviour. Since in her story, the girl's survival depends on her own efforts, Carter undoes Perrault's redaction of the story's oral, Breton, precursor, in which the girl's ingenuity saves her. She outwits the wolf by insisting she has to go outside to relieve herself because she is too shy to do so in his presence, and this gives her the opportunity to run away and save herself.

Carter thus retraces several steps of rewriting which this tale has experienced in the two dominant European traditions on which most classical fairy tales are based. Furthermore, she not

---

<sup>46</sup> *Bloody Chamber*, p. 95

only deviates from both these traditions, but also comments on the colonising influence that the French and German versions have had on the Western fairy tale, by basing the apparently most dramatic new motifs in her version on a little known Dutch version of the Red-Riding-Hood type. In this story, a boy is attacked by a werewolf but successfully defends himself and chops off a paw which turns into a hand; later an old woman dies from this terrible wound and is thus unmasked as a werewolf.

However, instead of merely using the motifs of the oral variant, Carter again introduces a number of transpositions: male into female protagonist, dangerous stranger into family, and most unsettling, victim of the werewolf into persecutor of an old woman in the resolution of the story. On her way to her grandmother's, Carter's girl is attacked by a werewolf, successfully defends herself and takes along the wolf's chopped off paw as a trophy. By the time she reaches her grandmother's house, the paw has turned into a hand, and recognising a distinctive wart on the index finger the girl understands that the werewolf is her grandmother. Confronting her, the old woman is confirmed as a werewolf in the most realistic terms: 'there was a bloody stump where her right hand should have been, festering already.'<sup>47</sup> The girl does not show the pity and redeeming love one would expect and which would be rewarded in a 'classical' tale, but calls the neighbours who help her to drive out the old woman and stone her to death. Carter endorses her protagonist's independence by giving her the means to maintain it: the girl inherits her grandmother's house and 'prospered.' But this 'happy ending' upsets generic conventions and conditioned expectations as it sets up the girl as an autonomous householder, living on her own and rewarded for behaviour - self-interest, lack of compassion, active determination - which earns countless lazy sisters and scheming maid servants in traditional tales atrocious punishment.

Thus Carter upends the expected reward scheme of the classical tale, but at the same time comments ironically on 'good' and 'bad' values taught by fairy tales. She explicitly calls her girl a 'good child'<sup>48</sup>, and in this directs a barb at both the French and German tradition in which the

---

<sup>47</sup> *Bloody Chamber*, p. 109

<sup>48</sup> *Bloody Chamber*, p. 109

girl is 'bad' because she disregards her mother's instructions not to deviate from the path, and is thus held responsible for her fate. Nevertheless, we feel pity for her because in all other respects the traditional 'Little Red Riding Hood' conforms (and even in her transgression conforms) to the expected behaviour and appearance of a 'good' little girl. In Carter, the girl is so good that she is trusted to negotiate the woods successfully without instructions; in fact, she has interiorised her society's demands to such an extent that she does precisely what is expected of her, that is, she exposes her grandmother and is rewarded for this. However, it would be difficult to applaud the execution of the old woman as witch as 'good' behaviour, and, indeed, her actions are not condoned by a single-voiced moral scheme inherent in the tale but shown to result from a historically specific environment. The achiever's voice is undermined by critical comments on the cruel persecution of the outcast, introducing a perspective opposed to the apparently dominant values taken on wholeheartedly by the girl. This invites empathy for the witch, and exposes the superstitions around which the witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth century were constructed as the petty envy of simple people. However, the two views exist side by side, and neither of them is endorsed by the full authority of a single narrative voice.

Carter upsets the genre conventions of the classical fairy tale in a number of ways. Rather than establishing a polarised distribution of good and bad characters where good is clearly designed and triumphs over evil, her tales portray an ambiguous mixture where good and evil depend on perspective, denying the reader the reassuring certainty of approval and identification. The unidentified past of the classical fairy tale is fragmented by elements which introduce historic specificity, and the happy ending with a wedding is replaced by the fate normally identified with failure, yet it is presented as a happy end. The one-dimensionality of the classical fairy tale where the real and the marvellous exist in the same dimension without breaks is picked up by Carter in her matter-of-fact presentation of the supernatural (there is no question in the narrative that the girl is attacked by a werewolf), nevertheless the satirising commentary on the identification of witches swings the tale to a highly critical attitude firmly opposed to an acceptance of the magical. However, the important point here is, that we are not dealing with the kind of attenuated suspense identified by Todorov as the constitutive factor of the fantastic where

the narrative at times invites doubt, at others belief in the supernatural, finally offering a psychological explanation. Carter's tale, rather, presents the supernatural as a superstition, entirely believed on one level, critically judged on another, by two diametrically opposed centres of consciousness.<sup>49</sup>

Where disenchantment in the classical tales always brings about an improvement, Carter uses this in two ways which question the values and hierarchical structures encoded in the tale. Either the breaking of a spell is a disenchantment in the negative sense of the word, showing up the splendours of the Countess' bedroom as tawdry make-believe in 'The Lady of the House of Love', for example, or as an apparent misperception of the noble lion's head in 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon'. Here the beast does not turn into a beautiful prince but turns out to be a rather pathetic man with a broken nose, rather like an old boxer. His immense wealth which had made possible the magical life in a secluded country mansion shrinks to a bourgeois, suburban existence where the couple enjoy their mediocre every-day-life in humdrum reality a Mr and Mrs Lyon. Rather than having been elevated, their social position has deteriorated, another reversal of one of the genre conventions of the fairy tale which links the happy ending with an elevation in status for at least one of the characters. In addition, the tragic fate of being turned into a beast is presented as a positive choice in Carter's second version of 'Beauty and the Beast', 'The Tiger's Bride', and is clearly meant as an unequivocal 'happy ending.' A similar overturning of all expectations occurs in 'The Company of Wolves' where the 'Little-Red-Riding-Hood' character chooses to stay with the wolf, rather than having to be saved from him. Here again, the transformation from human to animal world is presented in positive terms rather than as dreadful fate and a perversion.

Furthermore, in 'The Bloody Chamber,' 'The Tiger's Bride' and 'The Erl-King' Carter gives her female protagonists the means to present their experience and interpretation of the world around them in unmediated form by using a first-person, confessional, narrator instead of

---

<sup>49</sup> This interpretation of 'The Werewolf' has also been presented in a paper given in the 'International Women's Writing Seminar Series, May 1995-January 1996. Karen Seago, 'Intertextuality and the Fairy Tale in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*,' in *Identity, Gender and Creativity: Women's Writing in Germany, France and Britain* ed. by Lyn Thomas (London: UNL Press, 199?), pp. 83-90

the all-knowing, third person voice of the traditional tale. This re-appropriation of the narrative voice allows the muted female voice and agenda to speak out and is another aspect of Carter's revisioning of the canonical tale. As feminist scholars have shown, the suppression of the female voice in the construction of a fairy tale canon was a central element, a two-fold process which removed a female agenda from the tales themselves as well as silencing women as story tellers.<sup>50</sup> Rarely ending her tales with the closure of marriage as a happy end beyond which female experience disappears into an unrecorded void, Carter writes beyond the traditional end and explodes the classic fairy tale's resolution as a myth.

Thus, her disruptions of the generic constraints of the fairy tale, her complex reversals and inversions of motifs, and her decentring of plot lines, Carter not only puts new wine in old bottles but also achieves her aim of producing different bottles. By introducing ambiguity in the place of knowledge and uncertainty into apparently closed scripts, she breaks the stranglehold over our imagination of who we can become which has been attributed to the classical tale. And finally, Carter inserts the re-written tale in its history and makes its mythologised past visible, thus undercutting the received form of the fairy tale and returning it to a history of subversion rather than oppression. Marina Warner acknowledges the importance, and success, of Carter's project when she attributes the new interest in fairy tales to her work which has inspired writers and artists with her 'peculiar blend of romance and cynicism.'<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> See Ruth Bottigheimer 'Tale Spinners: Submerged Voices in Grimms' Fairy Tales', *New German Critique*, 27, Fall 1982, pp. 141-50 and 'Silenced Women in the Grimms' Tales: The 'Fit' Between Fairy Tales and Society in Their Historical Context', in *Fairy Tales and Society, Illusion, Allusion and Paradigm*, ed. by Ruth Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), pp. 115-32, Karen E. Rowe, 'To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale', in Bottigheimer, *Society*, pp. 53-74 and Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde, On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994) on the submerged female voice in the fairy tale. Heide Göttner-Abendroth shows in her study how fairy tale motifs are in many instances the (perverted) remnants of cult practices in matriarchal religion. *Die Göttin und ihr Mythos: Die matriarchalen Religionen in Mythos, Märchen und Dichtung* (3rd ed. Munich: Frauenoffensive, 1980)

<sup>51</sup> Marina Warner, 'Angela Carter: Bottle Blonde, Double Drag,' *Flesh and the Mirror, Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. by Lorna Sage (London: Virago, 1994), pp. 243-56 (244)